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WOODS BURNING IN THE SOUTH

LEAFLET NUMBER FORTY

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WOODS BURNING IN THE SOUTH

Prepared by the Forest Service

The South needs productive forest lands to maintain its prosperity but it cannot have them while uncontrolled woods burning continues.

Yearly burnings reported in the South amount to nearly 40,000,000 acres of forest and cut-over land, or about four-fifths of the total forest area burned in the United States. This represents a loss running into many millions of dollars.

Uncontrolled and unlawful woods burning, like the boll weevil, the malaria germ, and the cattle tick, drags down business and undermines the general welfare. Because of it only a small percentage of merchantable second-growth timber which could have replaced the virgin stand is now available on cut-over lands. Because of it land values have suffered, industries and population have moved out, and idle acres have multiplied. Because of it every year millions of young forest seedlings, which in a short time would have constituted a valuable asset to landowners, have been licked up by the flames.

Unlike the West, where serious fire losses are caused by lightning, the South has the power to eliminate its uncontrolled, destructive forest fires, for they are man-caused and can be prevented by curbing the careless fire user and dealing firmly with the malicious fire setter. Sound economic policy demands that this power be exerted and that the brand of the woods burner be extinguished. The South cannot afford to let the woods burner block economic progress.

Causes of Fire

Most of the woods fires in the South are started by hunters, smokers, stockmen, and others upon lands which they do not own. To these fires are added the fires escaping from railroad engines, logging operations, field clearings, and "warming fires." There has thus grown up the belief in many quarters that woods burning is as inevitable as the seasons. Many landowners feel that it is hopeless to try to keep fires from their land. So they become, in their helplessness, advocates of winter or spring burning. And one of the chief reasons they advance is that such burning is a means of defending their property against fires set by others. Yet often these protection burners make a bad situation worse by permitting their fires to spread beyond their own land.

The Menace of Woods Burning

An individual has the right to burn his own land, provided he confines the fire to his property and otherwise conforms to the law; but he is grievously at fault, unfair to his neighbors, and unmindful of the welfare of his community when he permits the fire set on his land to spread to the land of another. Forestry cannot be safely practiced in the South until the man who sets fire to the woods of

others is held to strict accountability. The irresponsible burner must be banished from the woods, and the well-intentioned burner must squarely face the responsibility incurred when he starts fire on his own land.

The Forest Service of the United States Department of Agriculture recognizes that its responsibility in this matter extends to its own practices in the administration of national forests in the South. It has written into its policies for the national forest in Florida that burning of the woods will not be permitted in connection with any further turpentine contracts except to clear off protective strips and to conduct scientific experiments on a limited scale. Similarly it is opposed to the use of fire on any national-forest lands. It has made a systematic effort to eliminate the causes of all unlawful burning; to strengthen its facilities for extinguishing fires that do occur; and to enforce strictly its fire-trespass laws and regulations.

To sum up, extensive forest destruction in the South results from the old custom of unlawful woods burning and the handicap which this custom imposes on the people who want to protect their forest lands for more profitable production. The woods burner, who is gnawing at the vitals of southern prosperity, is permitted largely to evade the responsibility for his acts. Custom, indifference, and lack of understanding often join with him in defeating the efforts of the individual landowner and the public to keep fires out.

The Remedy

The remedy is clear. Individual responsibility for promiscuous woods burning must be established, and the individual must be led through education to realize the need for outlawing such fire and for taking his part in keeping fire out of the forest lands. Those not amenable to reason must be controlled by the vigorous enforcement of law, in order that the interests of the public and the landowners may be protected. Systems of fire prevention organized by States and landowners must be extended and strengthened.

No one agency alone can cope with this situation. All private landowners, all the Southern States, and the Federal Government must agree on a common course of action and work together to put an end to unnecessary and costly forest destruction.

The following program is offered as suggestive of the course to be followed:

Fire Prevention

Fire prevention comes first. It must strike through education at the lack of information, the prejudice, and the careless criminality of the woods burner.

Every risk should be given close study, and direct and specific action should be taken for its control, reduction, and eventual elimination. Every agency of forest protection, public or private, through persistent personal contact should bring home to the town resident and the landowner a realization of the value of forests kept free from fire and of the loss to the individual and to the community that results from fire. There should be developed in each community and throughout the South a public sentiment against devastating woods burning and a determination to do away with it.

Every educational facility available should be brought into play. The motion picture and illustrated lecture should be used to bring to every southern schoolhouse, churchhouse, or other meetinghouse a forest-protection message for old and young. The press, the billboard, the poster, the community fairs, and expositions should all play their part.

Fire danger should be reduced by clearing highways and rights-of-way, making sawmills and other forest operations safer, and adequately safeguarding brush fires.

Those who cannot be persuaded by education must be reached by other means. Laws honestly, fearlessly, and fairly enforced must be called to the public aid.

Preparedness

Systematic preparation to cope with woods fires begins where prevention stops. Even with the unlawful woods burner restrained and carelessness hedged about with every possible precaution, we shall still—while men are human—have some fires in our southern woods. We must, therefore, have for every protective unit—

(1) A system of detection which will accurately locate every fire that occurs, within the fewest possible minutes after the first appearance of smoke.

(2) A means of communication by which the message that fire has broken out at a given place may be brought quickly to the nearest warden, ranger, or other person whose duty it is to attend to it.

(3) Tools, supplies, and equipment of the right kinds, in adequate quantities kept in the right places.

(4) Organized manpower and means of transportation which will insure that the fire reported can be hit quickly and hard before it gains headway.

Fire Suppression

The last step in fire-protection effort is actual fire suppression. Its aim is to extinguish the fire completely, with the least possible damage, in the shortest time. This requires energy, thoroughness, and organizing ability on the part of leaders in fire control. Providing effective fire suppression is a task which requires the best thought and cooperative effort of both landowners and the general public.

The 11 Southern States are all actively engaged in the protection of private and State-owned forests from fire in cooperation with the Federal Government under the terms of the Clarke-McNary law. It is believed that in the solution of the fire problem vigorous support of this cooperative effort offers the best promise of success. The forest area protected by these States in 1935 was 61,569,645 acres, while the area classed as "needing protection but receiving none" was 137,678,500 acres.

By working unitedly on such a cooperative program of fire protection for the South, including prevention, preparedness, and suppression, public and private agencies and landowners, backed by the popular will, can make and keep the forests of the South productive.

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